CHRIST AND THE COMMONPLACE

May 3, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 24:13-32

"...he took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him;..." --Luke 24:30,31 (RSV)

Inside the cover of the notebook I maintain for the storing of sermon materials, I keep a quotation from the 19th century English novelist, Anthony Trollope. I keep other things there as well, uplifting and inspiring things. But among them, in that little pocket inside the cover so I can see it every now and then as I'm thumbing through the contents, I keep this...

> "There is, perhaps, no greater hardship on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent, and be tormented."
> (Barchester Towers)

I keep that quotation close at hand to remind myself, one - that not everyone looks forward to this experience with the same degree of cheerful anticipation and, two, - Anthony Trollope forces the issue for me as to the purpose of this exercise. Contrary to what he seems to assume, the purpose is not for me to display my wares and demonstrate my cleverness nor for you to be entertained - but something other. The purpose is that in the encounter between preacher and congregation people will know and experience the reality of our boldest belief - namely that Jesus Christ is not dead, but alive and present in the world.

I'm going to let you in on a secret of the trade... a bit of normally very privileged information, widely shared by those who stand on this side of the preaching desk. It is that with great consistency you like what we don't when it comes to our sermons, and vice versa. When preachers get together and discuss this peculiar activity someone always says and all the others nod in recognition: "You know - I preached the worst sermon in my career a few weeks ago. It just never came together and I knew it. I felt awful about it. But afterward, a number of people told me how helpful it had been and how directly I had spoken to them."

I have come to believe that this common experience is God's way of

helping us to keep this activity in perspective. I also have concluded that it is the Spirit teaching us that God has an irritating way of confounding our criteria of excellence and our quality control systems. Given a choice, God has a way of going for the unlikely, the modest, the ordinary. One has to assume that when God was looking for a people with whom to make a covenant, a people who might represent God's interests in human history, God was not limited. With Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, Greece and Rome (even the United States of America) as alternatives, God ends up choosing a bunch of Semitic Bedouins, leading their goats around the desert, whose chief and wife were old, worn-out and childless. And when God is looking for a man in whom to live in history, one has to assume that among his alternatives were Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or at least Socrates... but he chose the illegitimate son on a young Jewish girl who lived in a remote village in a remote corner of the Roman Empire.

I think God is always trying to teach that to people who are weaned on standards of excellence, who have become expert at evaluating everything on the basis of quality control - from football teams to academic faculties. So I think one of God's more strenuous challenges when it comes to dealing with us (by us I mean most of us here this morning, by anyone's standards, wealthy, healthy and secure, successful, used to being number one, feeling pretty good about being number one) is to help us see that God loves and uses and speaks through - in addition to us, those this world misses, the ordinary - that is to say, the meek, the lonely, the poor, the failure, the sick, the oppressed and the dying. I think God is always trying to remind us that our extraordinary good fortune is not theologically significant: that God loves us - in spite of it, not because of it, that God's commitment to us is not dependent on our success, our wealth, or health, or power...

And I conclude that God rather enjoys reminding us that while we are called to do our best with this precious time together, to engage minds and encounter the world with intelligence and imagination and authority, he has a way of using the unlikely, the weak, the powerless for his purposes. When it comes to preaching that he can use the poor fragments, the dry crumbs from the whole illusive loaf, (which is what some of our sermons feel like to us) that he, the Risen Jesus Christ will on occasion, encounter - judge us, love us, heal us through the most ordinary words or gestures or events or people.

Anthony Trollope notwithstanding, that's really why we have the nerve to do this week in and week out: because we believe the Risen Christ will use the commonplace raw material of human life - your being there listening attentively and my being here trying to say it right - that the Risen Christ can use even this to live among us. That is some belief - and it is believable, at least in part because of a strange but beautiful little story which Luke alone has remembered for us.

In terms of drama, this story won't hold a candle to most of the religious experiences which will be the subject of intense testifying on television this morning. This one won't even compare with a 900 foot Jesus, or a Gospel Amusement Park. It is a terribly commonplace story.

It takes place on Easter day, late in the afternoon. It's Sunday, but in Jerusalem, that means Monday, the first day of the week after a holiday weekend. Saturday was Passover, for the friends of a Jesus, a strangely formal day, as it always is the day after someone you love dies. The traditional rituals take over, people talk carefully and say things they have learned to say and engage in prescribed behavior. Sunday life resumed. Like North Michigan Avenue on a Monday, energy level was high, shops bustling, people full of life. For the friends of Jesus it was the hardest day... after the funeral of your loved one when you can't believe life is going back to normal, people are talking to each other, the buses are still running, as if nothing happened.

Then there was that hysterical business about the empty tomb. God alone knew what that was about. So two of them headed out for Emmaus, a town four miles from Jerusalem. Maybe they lived there. Maybe they went to Emmaus because Emmaus is where you go when you can't stay in Jerusalem any longer.

What happened on the road wasn't particularly unusual. A stranger joined them, walked along and they talked about what had happened. They persuaded him to have dinner with them, and when, at the table, he broke the bread, blessed it and handed it to them... in the same way he had three nights before... their eyes were opened and they recognized him. It was the Lord! And then he was gone - vanished, Luke says "Got up and walked out" - if you prefer it that way. The moment of revelation - the resurrection appearance - the encounter with the Risen Christ - was over almost as quickly as it had happened, and it was so very commonplace. No flashing lights, no music, no thunderclap, no descent from the clouds. Nobody fell on the floor in ecstasy, no one spoke in tongues, no one wept for joy, no one made a profession, no one even took up an offering. Just three men at supper and the bread gets broken and passed around and it's the Christ - risen, alive, in their midst, Christ in the Commonplace.

Now that strange and beautiful little story flies in the face of the way the world perceives these things. If the Emmaus story is about Christ in the Commonplace, what the world expects of him and always seems to demand of us is Christ in the extraordinary. "Show us a sign" they used to ask Jesus. "Walk across my swimming pool." Herod says in Jesus Christ Superstar, "Prove it - in some way we can taste and see and feel. Give us a burning bush, or a thunderbolt, or a voice speaking our name in the garden and if you can't manage something verifiable, how about a private religious experience, confirmed at least in the intensity of my own emotions? Give me something to hold on to: some extraordinary experience."

Henri Nouwen observed, in a book on spirituality,

> "Many people flock to persons and places who promise intensive experiences of togetherness, cathartic emotions of exhilaration and liberating sensations of ecstasy. In our desperate need for fulfillment and our restless search for the experience of divine intimacy, we are all too prone to construct our own spiritual events." [Reaching Out, p. 92]

I don't know anyone who admits to watching all five hours of Shirley MacLaine's televised spiritual odyssey back in February. The reviews I read confirmed the wisdom of my decision not to watch... It was apparently pretty thin - and pretty bizarre and altogether forgettable. But interestingly the Christian Century, which I expected to be properly offended by such a display of tacky and trivial spirituality actually urged gentleness and understanding. After all, the Century editor counseled, - Andrew Greely's National Opinion Research Center discovered that nearly one- third of the population claims a degree of clairvoyance. "We needn't advocate trace channeling or Hot Tub Telepathy. But neither should we reject out of hand signs of people's underlying desire to be in touch with something eternal." ["Pruning Time for Shirley MacLaine," Craig V. Anderson, Christian Century (February 25, 1987), p. 182.]

It is apparent that the more uncertainty this world presents us and the more fear we experience, the more intense will be our need for the kind of emotional experience popular religion offers. Our need for the eternal is not manufactured, however, Shirley MacLaine is an easy target. So are the purveyors of the occult, the weeping thousands sending tear-stained checks into the television evangelists who make them feel it and thus know it in their hearts, easy targets for thoughtful theologically sound religion. But let's not. Rather, let's acknowledge that we'd like to know something of the eternal also; that while our careful demeanor, our cultivated skepticism would prevent us from waving our arms in the air and shouting "Hallelujah" about anything with possible exception of a playoff win over the Celtics or a World Series at Clark and Addison, and while our common sense would prevent us from sending money to anyone who looks us in the eye at 8:00 o'clock Sunday morning on television and asks us to... because if we don't God is going to call him home... nevertheless, may we acknowledge that we'd like to know something of the eternal: that at heart, that's why we get up on Sunday morning and forego a walk on the lake or the Sunday papers and coffee in bed, or brunch with Bloody Mary's: that there is always the chance, the hope even, that we will be introduced to the eternal: that the Risen Christ will actually meet us.

One of the most harmful religious ideas around is that faith experiences are extraordinary, abnormal experiences. And one of the most helpful and certainly one of the most beautiful ideas around is the one which is conveyed by the story of Emmaus, namely that God uses the ordinary, that Christ comes in the Commonplace: that the Risen Christ will actually be present in the ordinary, everyday, commonness of our life.

There is something particularly Presbyterian about that. In fact, we have celebrated the political expression of that theological insight this morning. We were born as a church out of the revolutionary idea of John Calvin's that ordinary people, with God's help, are perfectly capable of ordering their own spiritual affairs and governing their church. And the more they thought about it the more the Reformers concluded that ordinary people were perfectly capable of comprehending God's word - so they better read the Bible in their own language, and of understanding and participating in God's praise - so they better have a liturgy in the vernacular. And the more that kind of thinking got around in the 16th and 17th centuries, the more people began to wonder whether or not ordinary

folk might even be capable of ordering their own governmental structures and actually be responsible for their own government. We expressed that venerable but always radical way of thinking this morning by doing something peculiarly Presbyterian - namely ordaining lay people in the very same way that we ordain clergy. I confess that when I realized this text would appear on the same day we were ordaining and installing elders and deacons, I thought about calling this sermon "Ordaining the Ordinary," and decided not to lest those ordained today conclude that I was commenting on their credentials.

They are clearly an extraordinary bunch. But the point of this exercise is precisely their ordinariness and our faith that God uses the ordinary; that Christ comes in the Commonplace. So, we call them elders, and in case they start thinking like a Board of Directors, or a Cabinet, or ruling junta - we call them by that eccentric name - a Session. Our strength is just this business of ordaining ordinary members of the church and asking them to become spiritual leaders.

One of the loveliest ideas I know is that the Risen Christ is present in the commonplace. Where might that be? Christian scholarship has spent a lot of time discussing that and has suggested that the Risen Christ encounters us in:

- the unexpected and unanticipated surprises of life:

- and in judgment, when life feels "out of harmony with the ultimate coherence of things."

- and in reconciliation, whenever that which is broken is healed.
[See The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 234]

If that is more ambitious than you want to be - try a popular preacher, novelist, Frederick Buechner, who says it another way.

> "The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears reveal only... the gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and imagination... what we may see is Jesus himself."
> [The Magnificent Defeat, p. 87-88]

The Risen Christ appeared to his friends - in rather ordinary ways... he walked with two of them on the road to Emmaus. And so - you and I might begin by naming our own Emmaus:

Emmaus is where you go when you can't stay in Jerusalem any longer...

Emmaus is where you go and what you do to avoid the truth about yourself.

Emmaus is where you go when life closes in, when it's all blind alley and closed doors and there are no options left.

Emmaus can be a very ordinary place.

Emmaus is where you go for novelty, when everyday sameness is oppressive and you think you will die of boredom.

Emmaus is where you go when you can't think anymore about your failures - or the hollowness of your victories.

Emmaus is where you go to avoid the reality of death in your life.

Emmaus is where you go when you cannot remain in the same place any longer.

Emmaus is a very human place: It is your dinner table - where bread is blessed, broken and shared - with those you love. Christ is always there.

Emmaus can be the theater, or a trip around the world. It can be an affair, a martini too many, a behavior you know is destructive, dishonest and unhealthy but which you find yourself doing anyhow.

And Emmaus is where you and I go to meet something of the eternal... Emmaus is where you and I go in the hope that Jesus Christ will show up and find us there.

The promise of the Gospel which I proclaim to you is that Jesus Christ will be there. Jesus Christ is Risen: The Christian religion makes the bold assertion that Jesus Christ is God's healing power at work in the world: that he is alive, risen, and that he will come to you in the ordinary, the commonplace... when love surprises you, when beauty intrudes, when judgment makes you uncomfortable, and when reconciliation happens.

The Good News is only partially contained in the memory of an open tomb. The rest of it is in this strange but beautiful story. Christ in the commonplace, on a dusty road, in bread broken, in city streets, in all those places, where life is lived...

That is when he will meet us. That is where he bids us believe in him, love him, and live as his joyful people. Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come Holy Spirit, with light and truth so that we may see his face in the faces of those about us, and know his love in the ordinariness of our own lives.

Come, Lord God, in the commonplace and help us receive you there and love you and serve you, in all we do. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.